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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Afghan Media Honor Partial Ban on Taliban Reporting

REF: KABUL 01191

SUMMARY

11. (U) In response to the April 8, 2007, execution of an Afghan journalist by the Taliban, many Afghan media outlets are fully or partially boycotting Taliban-related news for one week. While most government media already limit their reporting on the Taliban, this development is especially noteworthy for the independent media, who have previously asserted their right as a free press to report on the Taliban (reftel). This development could signal a shift in the Taliban's previously masterful manipulation of the free press to get out its messages.

12. (U) The Taliban abducted Afghan journalist and translator Ajmal Naqshbandi, along with the Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo and a driver, last month in Helmand Province. Mastrogiacomo was released in a controversial deal brokered by the GOA which involved exchanging five Taliban prisoners for his freedom. The driver was beheaded last month. Ajmal Naqshbandi, a 23-year old newlywed, was executed by having his throat slit on April 8, 2007, in Helmand Province.

13. (U) On April 9, 2007, the day after Ajmal's execution, the National Union of Afghan Journalists convened a gathering of media organizations, including the Union of Independent Afghan Reporters and the Afghan Journalist Defense Committee, along with representatives from major Afghan print and broadcast media organizations. The Union called on Afghan media to take measures protesting Ajmal's death and to enforce a ban on Taliban-related news. The Union asked Afghan print media to print the front page of their next day's edition in black and for broadcast media to cease all broadcasts for one minute at 1500 hours local time on April 9. In response, about half the major dailies printed half or part of their first page in black the next day. Broadcast media honored the Union's request en masse. Almost all major broadcast outlets in Afghanistan, including both private and government radio and television, participated in the one minute of silence. Participants included Tolo TV, Shamshad TV, Ariana TV, and Aina TV (private nationwide/international stations) and Radio Azadi (Radio Free Europe, US supported but independent). Government broadcast media went beyond this: Radio Television Afghanistan ceased broadcasting

for two minutes, while Radio Afghanistan played a song of grief for ten minutes at the specified time.

¶4. (U) Once calls for the ban became public, according to the Afghan Independent Journalist Association (AIJA), several journalists and media outlets received phone calls threatening their lives if they participated in the ban. An AIJA representative also confirmed reports that the Taliban have said journalists should not use the terms "terrorists" and "insurgents" to describe the Taliban and that they would abduct and kill any journalists who did.

BANNING TALIBAN-RELATED NEWS

¶5. (U) The Union also asked Afghan media to boycott any news provided by the Taliban or about the Taliban for a period of one week. (Note: Minister of Information Khoram told Charge and PAO that the boycott idea originated with him and that in his view it should last a month to be effective.) The Public Affairs Section polled government and independent broadcast outlets to determine how many are participating in the ban and to what degree. Although several print media outlets are not participating in the ban, our poll found that most Afghan broadcast outlets are enforcing the ban to varying degrees. While most government media already do not cover the Taliban, several independent media outlets are enforcing a partial ban. Under this partial ban, they will not cover news provided by any Taliban spokesman or news that would aid the Taliban for one week; they will, however, report on Taliban-related news provided by the GOA or from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

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¶6. (U) Most noteworthy is the participation of Tolo TV in the partial ban. Officials from Tolo, the country's leading independent television station, state that they will enforce the partial ban for one week from Monday, April 9, to Monday, April 16, 2007. This is a significant departure for Tolo TV, which has been painted by the GoA as its adversary due to Tolo's regular coverage of Taliban-related news, including broadcast of statements by purported Taliban spokesmen. In fact, Tolo TV refrained from reporting an April 10 attack carried out by Taliban militants in Zabul Province during which several Afghan National Army soldiers were killed.

¶7. (U) Ariana TV and Shamshad TV, also nationally popular independent stations, have stopped reporting Taliban-related news as well. Officials from both said they wish to show solidarity with the Afghanistan National Journalist Union and other media organizations in Afghanistan.

PRINT MEDIA

¶8. (U) Pajhwok, Afghanistan's only independent nationwide news wire service, is honoring the ban and has not reported on the Taliban since Monday, April 9. The government news wire, Bakhtar Information Agency (BIA), is also enforcing a partial ban, stating that if there is a report about the Taliban which would demonstrate the Taliban's power or would boost their morale it won't be reported, but if a report will support the Afghan government, it will be reported. Since BIA feeds news to government papers such as Anis and Hewad, these publications are, in essence, also enforcing the partial ban. Weesa Daily (independent) is not participating in the ban on Taliban-related reporting. Cheragh Daily has long honored the GoA's request to not report on the Taliban.

INTERNATIONAL PRESS COMMUNITY

¶9. (U) Although the international press community in Afghanistan

was not asked to participate in the Afghan media ban of Taliban-related news, it has lent its support to the Afghan media community following the killing of Ajmal Naqshbandi. Numerous international media organizations, including AP, signed a petition condemning the killing. AP and AFP sent representatives to the tribute organized in Zar Nigar Park for Ajmal on Tuesday, April 10, where some five hundred citizens and representatives of social and journalism organizations joined to honor their slain colleague.

COMMENT

¶10. (U) Amidst an environment of tension between the free Afghan press and the GoA (reftel), many members of the Afghan media have decided voluntarily, albeit temporarily, to suspend their right to free speech to make a statement against the Taliban. By executing a young, defenseless Afghan journalist, the Taliban has driven the Afghan media community towards solidarity with the GoA. Traditionally, the Taliban has masterfully manipulated the free press to get its messages out, and in spite of GoA criticism, much of the Afghan press has exerted its right to freedom of speech by continuing to report on the Taliban. In this instance, however, the Taliban may have miscalculated or underestimated the outrage the Afghan media community would feel over the killing of one of its own. The partial ban on Taliban reporting occurring this week in Afghanistan shows that the Afghan media are willing to sacrifice an ideal they believe in to protest a deplorable act. What remains to be seen is whether the Afghan media might extend its ban on Taliban coverage in response to other Taliban atrocities committed against non-journalists. That can only be evaluated after the ban's conclusion on Monday, April 16.